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FCC should push Comcast to get Internet to more low-income families

By [The Times Editorial Board](#)

If the FCC OKs another merger for Comcast, it should insist the firm get broadband to more low-income families

Promises, promises. To win federal regulators' approval for its acquisition of NBC Universal, cable giant Comcast promised in 2011 to offer low-cost Internet connections to millions of low-income households in its service area for three years. Now, eager for the green light to acquire another cable operator — Time Warner Cable — Comcast has pledged to extend its generous discounts to TWC's turf as well. But such commitments to narrow the digital divide are meaningless if regulators don't demand results.

In addition to reviewing the antitrust implications of the \$45-billion deal, the Federal Communications Commission is considering whether the consolidation is in the public interest. That expansive mandate gives the commission a rare opportunity to bring broadband, which is largely unregulated, to more underserved and disadvantaged communities. Everyone has a stake in that effort. The more connected those communities become, the more opportunities they will have to grow economically and integrate into the rest of society. That's why Los Angeles County officials and the California Emerging Technology Fund, a nonprofit that promotes broadband in low-income areas, have urged the FCC to require Comcast to sign up nearly half of the qualified residents in its service area for broadband within two years.

That may be too high a bar, considering that Comcast has recruited only 11% of the eligible Californians so far. Yet the low sign-up rate is also a signal that the company's efforts haven't been enough. Yes, Comcast has done considerably more than other top broadband providers. And it has made its \$10-per-month "Internet Essentials" program available to more families for a longer period than initially planned. But Comcast still hasn't implemented the program well; as the fund [pointed out](#) to the FCC, Comcast's sign-up process has been [marred](#) by technical problems and long delays, and its marketing and outreach efforts have been of limited effect. In addition, by restricting the offer to families with children in grade school, it excludes many older residents struggling to climb out of poverty.

Unlike numerous other companies that abandoned their commitments after their mergers were approved, Comcast has [kept its pledge](#) to offer broadband to low-income families. But if the FCC is to approve another blockbuster merger for the company, it should insist that Comcast try

harder to *sell* it. That means more effective outreach — for example, by working through nonprofits that have a record in bringing services to low-income and immigrant-heavy communities — as well as an easier sign-up process, more technical assistance and family-friendly equipment. Comcast can't be expected to close the digital divide alone, but it can do a better job of hooking up the low-income residents on its turf.

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